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Abstract

"In this essay I will show how novel reading—and especially novel *re-reading*—can do what Zylstra says: 'disclose God's glory for human delight.'"

Posting about the satisfaction of reading familiar stories from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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The Novels You Re-read

Dave Schelhaas

I am a retired English teacher, seventy-seven years old, and I love to read novels. As a boy I read fiction of all kinds uncritically, and ever since I have been breathing in fiction. One might ask whether spending hours every week reading stories about make-believe people doing made-up stuff is a prudent use of an old guy's time. Well, I think it's just fine.

While I was still in high school, my mother gave me a collection of essays by Calvin English professor Henry Zylstra titled *A Testament of Vision*. In one of these essays Zylstra writes, "The art of fiction is man's acknowledgement and reflection of the divine beauty revealed in and beyond nature and life. That is what fiction is for. Its function is in its own aesthetic way, not in a deliberately practical, or moral, or esoterically religious way, to disclose God's glory for God's and man's delight."¹

In this essay I will show how novel reading—and especially novel *re-reading*—can do what Zylstra says: "disclose God's glory for human delight."

"You really lose a lot by never reading books again," C. S. Lewis writes in a letter to his life-long friend Arthur Greeves.² He goes on to say, "the fact of re-reading indicates a quality of reading that satisfies the conscious or unconscious literary taste of the reader" (210).

When Lewis was eighteen, he came upon the novel *Phantastes* by George MacDonald and he was captivated. Lewis writes that at first he did not know what he found so enchanting about MacDonald's novels, but eventually he realizes, "It was Holiness" (Wilson 47). *Phantastes* told a story that featured a hero on an arduous journey/quest who had to deal with almost impossible difficulties. This, of course, is a pattern found in

many literary classics, including many of Lewis's novels as well as the great *Lord of the Rings* books by his friend Tolkien. I believe the satisfaction that comes from reading this archetypal plot pattern causes readers to return to a novel for a second or third reading. Other, closely related Biblical archetypes such as a Christ-figure, a Prodigal son, or an Adam/Eve fall-from-grace have a similar appeal.

To test my thesis, I looked back at my own reading history and also emailed a number of acquaintances who are readers, asked them if they ever re-read books, and if they did, what book especially did they choose to re-read.

One story that I read repeatedly from an old anthology when I was a boy was an old French tale called "Roland the Noble Knight." In this heroic tale Roland tells his companions to go to a safer fortification as he defends the Roncenvaux Pass by himself and eventually dies with sword in hand. This death, which could make me tear up as I read it again, was the thing that drew me back to the story again and again. Why? I think it was the nobility of his actions, the triumph of his goodness even in death, which captured me. And, of course, the greatest pattern in all literature, the Christ pattern: "Greater love has no man than this—that he lay down his life for his friends."

The first person I asked whether he re-read any novels mentioned John Irving's great novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. If you know this novel you know that it has two main characters—one whose mother is killed early in the story and the other, Owen Meany, the hero who becomes a Christ-figure and eventually dies in the process of fulfilling his task.

Another person mentioned Walt Wangerin's animal fable *The Book of the Dun Cow*. She says the book makes real the struggles we should be willing to take on in order to overcome what's wrong and how all the members of a community are needed. One of the great pleasures of reading *Dun Cow*, she says, is the sudden *realization* or (upon re-reading it) *recollection* that Mundi Cani was just like Jesus. Here again we see the basic pattern of the hero—in this case the lowly dog Mundo Cani—who sacrifices his life for the greater good.

An under-fifty reader re-read *I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier. He writes, "I've probably reread it a couple times. For sure, rereading that book is as much about stepping back into my youth—and my young imagination—as it is about being blown away by the plot. The emotion of it gets me every time . . . a boy who lost his parents." This brings up another archetypal pattern—the traumatic death of a parent. Lewis' biographer A. N. Wilson writes that "Macdonald's entire *oeuvre* has been described as a lifetime effort of mourning the traumatic . . . death of his mother."³ Lewis, as we know,

experienced the death of his mother when he was eight, and this motif appears in a number of his novels.

A pastor friend writes, “One novel that gripped me when assigned to me in college was *Adam Bede* by George Eliot. I reread it—either entirely or in part—a couple of times, and I think what gripped me most were the sermons and prayers of Dinah Morris. And when Dinah accompanied Hetty to Hetty’s execution, I felt a wave of grace.” This reader experiences vicariously the “grace” depicted so powerfully by the author and also experiences, perhaps as Lewis did, “holiness.” I read *Adam Bede* for the first time a couple of years ago and remember being mesmerized by the sermons of Diana Morris also, and was amazed at the quality of goodness that emanated from her and also from the title character, Adam Bede.

Another friend mentions the Mitford Series by Jan Karon, part of their attraction being the sense of comfort and safety they create. My sixth-grade granddaughter says that re-reading Harry Potter books is “very satisfying, especially at the end” (when the disorder in the community is restored by the heroics of Harry). Throughout the history of imaginative literature, these abstract qualities—holiness, goodness, wonder, grace, forgiveness, comfort—have had a magnetic power that draws us readers back to them as we experience them in stories we have read.

I recently re-read *Atticus*, a contemporary novel by the Catholic writer Ron Hansen. I had taught the novel several times and loved it. I loved it as much reading it again last winter. *Atticus* is based on the biblical story we call The Prodigal Son, a literary archetype that is found in the early literature of many different cultures. The novel is part detective story as the father, Atticus, spends much of the novel trying to unravel the mystery of his son’s murder in a decadent Mexican coastal city environment. The son had been emotionally alienated from his father for many years. As a teen-ager he had an accident while driving the family car that killed his mother. He was afflicted with bipolar disease, which also contributed to aberrant behavior. Atticus’s journey eventually leads him to discover that his son is not dead (Think “This my son was dead and is alive again.”).

The great moment for me occurs in the last sentence of the novel. Atticus returns to his ranch, still separated from his son, but one morning he sees “a yellow taxi heading toward the house. And while his son was still a long way off, his father rushed out to greet him.”

That last sentence, almost a direct biblical quotation, made my eyes fill with tears as I read it again this past winter. That’s what archetypal stories can do. They connect with something deep within us, our subconscious, perhaps. In fact, as I re-read the novel, I

forget about the archetype. That's probably why it works on me. When Atticus rushes out to greet his son, I am the son and it is my heavenly father rushing out to greet me.

The old stories keep appearing and we find them so satisfying that we read them and read them again. As Zylstra says, we recognize in the story a "reflection of the divine beauty revealed in and beyond nature and life."⁴

FOOTNOTES

1. Zylstra, Henry. *Testament of Vision*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1958.
2. Pope, Harry. *Becoming C. S. Lewis, A Biography of Young Jack Lewis (1898-1918)*. Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois, 2019
3. Wilson, A. N. *C. S. Lewis*. W. W. Norton and Company, New York, London, 1990.
4. Zylstra, Henry. *Testament of Vision*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1958.